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ABSTRACT

Although there is a lack of research regarding the impact of ropes courses on student development, this paper states that there is significant information on this experiential learning experience contributing to student retention. It describes research designed to study how an experiential ropes course can impact undergraduate male and female (18 to 26 years old) student development among students attending a university in a rural area of a Mideastern state. Along with survey data, observations, and journal writings, the students completed open-ended questions about their experiences on the final paper and were interviewed. When the data was analyzed from a qualitative approach, four themes emerged. Trust, friendship, community, and communication are components of problem solving. The paper suggests that given the recent attention to school violence and violent behavior against diverse populations, the areas of community development, trust development, and teaching non-violent ways to solve problems are timely topics. It concludes that experiential learning, such as a ropes course, can increase a college student's ability to solve problems in a socially acceptable manner; build and teach a person how to appropriately trust others; empower a person with the skills necessary to be part of a healthy community; and increase a college student's interpersonal skills, social skills, and physical ability. (Contains 22 references.) (JDM)

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The Impact of an Experiential Instructional Design on College Student Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to describe the impact of an experiential ropes course on undergraduate male and female (18 to 26 years old) college student development using a qualitative and quantitative approach. The students attend a university in a rural location of a mid-eastern state. A novel survey was created to determine the pre experiential course and post experiential course changes in development. Two groups of eleven students were also observed and asked to keep journals about their experiences. Along with the survey data, observations and journal writings, the students completed open-ended questions about their experiences on the final paper and were interviewed about their experiences. The following semester a one credit course which met for three (3) hours per week, for eight (8) weeks was also used as a data source. Journal and observation data was analyzed from this course. The survey had 56 questions related to demographic informatien, student development, physical activity/ability, self esteem, stress level, friendship, social activity, and peer beliefs.

When the data is examined from a quantitative perspective, significant findings are revealed related to the decrease of stress for the participants. Using a two tailed paired sample test, the level of stress was reduced for the college students at the conclusion of the course. When the data was analyzed from a qualitative approach certain themes emerged. The four themes were trust, friendship, community, and communication as a component of problem solving. The students discussed how their classmates became their friends and the quality of the friendships were more significant compared to other classmates in other classes. There was also a greater sense of community among the students. The college students reported that they learned how to work together to solve problems and to trust the group. Trust is important given the fact that an individual has to trust the group in order to complete specific aspects of the course. At times, the individual is dependent upon the group to provide valuable support and safety. The last theme dealt with communication and problem solving. When presented with a problem the group had to determine what problem solving process would be most effective to overcome any challenge. The vehicle that was used to resolve the dilemma was the process of communication. Communication was the key aspect to solving a specific problem presented in class.

Introduction

Given the increased media attention on school violence and student aggression the idea of establishing a sense of community in the academic environment is paramount. When members of a community work as a team and trust one another, each individual person is respected and appreciated for his or her own diverse characteristics. To belong to a group, community, or society allows an individual to feel accepted and supported and to no longer feel isolated by the pressures of going to school. The following scenario is a journal entry from a student who completed an outdoor experiential ropes course:

"Admittedly I had absolutely no idea in the world a "ropes" course was going to consist of. A far away memory came back to me from years past, a memory where someone somewhere was saying that if I ever got a chance to take a ropes course, do it. Well, that was good enough so I signed up and had no idea what to expect until the first day of class.

Pleasant anticipation--the first day I couldn't believe that this was going to be a college course, it sounded too fun. There had to be a catch somewhere down the line; some unexpected exam, boring seminar on teamwork, brain numbing speeches on the importance of working well with other people. The first day we were playing games and laughing, had to be some type of set-up, lure us in and then pounce with a 100 question multiple choice test.

The tests and the speeches never materialized, however. The course was indeed fun and rewarding. I have never been a very sociable person and at times, I have great difficulty interacting with people I am not familiar with. There was no opportunity to be uncomfortable, no time to be difficult to deal with. The activities that we did truly inspired a sense of team work and a sense of accomplishment when everyone was able to complete the tasks. I had imagined some type of corny back patting, are we having fun yet?' When I was told that team work was one of the goals of the class, but a genuine sense of caring what happened and concern over how to best accomplish the tasks were what I ended up feeling, and it was good.

As for the physical aspects of the class, that wasn't too much of a problem. All my life I've been testing myself physically and I had confidence that I would not be afraid to try all the activities. The part of the class that scared me was working so close with so many unfamiliar faces, and the fact that I was able to over-come that feeling and successfully integrate myself into a group was my real accomplishment. I decided early on that in this class I could either a) remain aloof, not worry about whether or not the group met its goals and stay safe, or b) get involved and interact with the others and try wholeheartedly to complete the tasks. I am glad that I choose b, and I truly feel that this class will help me to choose b in the future when faced with other challenges."

The above journal entry provides the reader with the insight into how a reluctant student was able to learn some valuable skills beyond the classroom goals. The outdoor experiential ropes course provided the student with the skills to trust unfamiliar fellow students and the ability to be a team member. The author of the above journal entry learned to have a sence of community and care about his or her classmates! The literature review provides the reader with a discussion related to experiential learning courses and the impact on college development.

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Theoretical Perspectives

While there is a lack of research regarding the impact of ropes courses on student development, the review of the literature reveals significant information on factors contributing to student retention. A review of the literature has revealed friendships, sense of community, and teamwork as contributing factors to student development, retaining students, increasing positive peer relationships, and increasing college students' social skills as well as interpersonal skills.

Developing positive peer relationships and friendships has been found to positively impact the retention of students in post secondary institutions. Astin and Panos (1967) investigated college students' ability to complete a four year college program within four years. Thirty-six thousand, four hundred and five college students were surveyed before and after a four-year interval. This longitudinal study found 36 characteristics that affected drop-out rates. It was found that positive peer relationships were significantly related to college retention.

Some research suggests that sources of social support change throughout the life-span. Given that the support network changes because of both the individual's needs and the particular life stage of the individual, peer relationships seem to emerge as crucial sources of emotional support for young adults. Burgio and Tryanski (1988) examined friendships and family relationships of 142 older adults and 38 young adult college students who completed a self-report questionnaire measuring friendship expectancies, demographic backgrounds, health status, global life satisfaction and interpersonal affect. Participants also completed the Network Analysis Profile which measured the quantitative and qualitative aspects of both friendships and family relationships. This study found that friendships were as important as family relationships in influencing life satisfaction among young adults. The young adult at college must develop independence and peer relationships, according to Erikson's (1978) developmental stage model. Friendships offer a testing ground for emerging identities and offer opportunities for enhancing a sense of self-competence and self-esteem needed for establishing one's independence (Rosow, 1967). It was concluded that friend support relationships represent a very important factor in the developmental cycle of

young adults. Developmental tasks require such relationships for psychological well-being (Larson, 1984).

To determine the factors that contributed to retention rates McGrath (1997) completed a study in which three hundred and fifty-three first year college students were participants. The two most important factors in predicting persistence between the first and second years were grade point average and students' impressions of other students. According to McGrath (1997) students who have the opportunity in residential programs to interact with other students and develop friendships establish easier adjustments to college life. Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that administrators and faculty pay close attention to the co-curricular life of students, as well as offering orientation programs that provide students an opportunity to socially interact and begin bonding relationships.

Allbritten (1983) examined the relationship between retention, GPA, and developmental characteristics of first year college students and found that peer relationships contributed most to the prediction of GPA. GPA's have been found to be positively correlated to retention rates, therefore students who develop friendships during their college careers will more likely complete their degrees.

Building a sense of community and solving problems through cooperative teamwork are additional elements that arise in ropes courses and have also been factors contributing to student development and retention rates in academic settings. Maxwell (1997) developed a model for effectively combining experiential and non-experiential (traditional) methods of teaching roles and responsibilities of team members. It was found that experiential learning fosters relationships among team members. Johnson (1996) described the benefits students received from participating in a San Francisco high school's innovative outdoor adventure program. Students learned valuable social and life skills from participating in this program, including problem-solving, leadership skills, teamwork, and trust. Annat (1995) describes techniques for teachers to use during rock climbing and ropes courses in order to challenge participants to succeed, including validating participants' feelings, maintaining respect for others, and teaching leadership skills.

Davies and Cohen (1995) studied behaviors of AT-RISK youth while involved in an outdoor adventure program. While participating in a ropes course, students practiced teamwork and problem-

solving skills, and worked on fear and stress reduction skills. The goal was to help participants experience power, joy, and trust. The results of the Self-esteem Index were overwhelmingly positive, indicating significantly increased scores. Although this study only included high risk high school students, establishing one's own identity, feeling a sense of belonging to a group, and feeling competent are developmental tasks for all teenagers.

Similarly, an outdoor experiential program for incarcerated adolescents showed that the most valued characteristic of the experience was related to helping/assisting others. The study supports that the "process" not just the "content" needs to be considered when training staff (Whitman, 1995).

Several studies have been completed that examined the factors of teamwork and group unity of employees taking adventure training workshops. Bronson (1992) studied 17 corporate managers who participated in a three day adventure training program to develop teamwork and group unity. The unit improved significantly on eight of the ten items of the Team Development Inventory. Sproul and Priest (1992) described numerous benefits of ropes courses, including increased self esteem and group cooperation. Another study was conducted using a ropes course to assess work group awareness and acceptance of change. Results showed a significant increase in group work performance (McAvoy, Mitten, Stringer, Steckart, and, Sproles, 1996).

Perhaps the most well known organization that is best known for risk-taking outdoor adventure activities is Outward Bound. Ropes courses are included in these very popular outdoor educational activities. A meta-analysis of 96 studies published between 1968 and 1994 concludes that Outward Bound programs stimulate the development of interpersonal competencies, enhance leadership skills, and have positive effects on adolescents' senses of empowerment, self-control, independence, self-understanding, assertiveness, and decision-making skills (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997).

Traditional education has conditioned students to be rewarded for competing rather than cooperating with one another. Teachers are not often seen collaborating with students and one another. The techniques used in experiential education help students as well as instructors to collaboratively build cooperative teams to effectively accomplish the tasks at hand. An ethnographic case-study of outdoor/adventure education showed interesting interaction patterns and forms of communication

(Humberstone, 1990). This qualitative study involved 13-15 year old students at a school in England, observing students in adventure activities, including a ropes course. There appeared to be an interpersonal, informal relationship between teachers and students. The pupils perceived most of the teachers as "friendly", willing to "have a laugh" and generally different from many of their teachers in the classroom setting. For the most part, the girls and boys experienced a less constrained, more interpersonal, relaxed and trusting relationship among themselves and between themselves and their teachers. Working together to problem-solve and make group decisions is a big part of participating in ropes courses. Thus teamwork is a major element stressed by instructors of ropes courses. For example, a student team might work together to get the entire group over a twelve foot wall or through a web of ropes. After each challenge in a series of this kind, the group processes the experience by discussing how they functioned as a team. Such questions were asked as; "Who took the leadership role? Did everyone feel they contributed to the group? Were the strengths of all the group members used?" These questions are used to get the group members to analyze how they interacted with each other. The wall or the web became a metaphor for the school environment (Rohnke, 1989). These skills learned - leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, listening, recognizing each others' strengths, and supporting each other through difficulties - can apply equally well to other settings.

The review of the literature indicates that such factors as friendship formation, peer relationships, sense of community and teamwork within the academic environment, communication and problem-solving, contribute to student development and decreasing attrition rates at higher educational institutions. Studies have also shown that these same factors are developed and nurtured in supportive experiential education environments, such as ropes courses.

The challenge to find research related to the effectiveness of an experiential learning course (ropes course) upon future teachers is just that, a challenge. Given the limited amount of research in this area, Hastie (1994) studied the outcome of an adventure experiential course (ropes course) upon 25 third year pre-service teachers. Hastie's (1994) goal related to this research was to increase the pre-service teachers' awareness of the concepts of enjoyment, success, and challenge. The students did describe such concepts in their responses as well as the themes of ownership of one's perceptions, trust, increased self-esteem,

and a sense of empowerment. Hastie (1994) also reported that team-winning was understated or the process "should stem away from [a] team-winning focus and be directed towards individuals' improvement and internal success" (p.32).

Gass (1987) found that experiential programs such as a wilderness orientation program (rock climbing, rappelling, backpacking, and the like) have a positive influence on college retention, increase in GPA after two semesters, and an increase in student development behaviors. Student development behaviors include developing autonomy, developing interpersonal relationships with sub-tasks related to interdependence and tolerance, and the last behavior dealt with developing appropriate relationships with the opposite gender. The research discussed in this study will benefit scholars by providing more data in the area of outdoor experiential learning courses and its impact upon college student development.

Research Methods and Data Source

The purpose of this research was to describe the impact of an experiential ropes course on undergraduate male and female (18 to 26 years old) college student development using a qualitative and quantitative approach. The students attended a university in a rural location of a mid-eastern state. A novel survey was created to determine the pre experiential course and post experiential course changes in development. Two groups of eleven students were also observed and asked to keep journals about their experiences. Along with the survey data, observations and journal writings, the students completed open-ended questions about their experiences on the final paper and were interviewed about their experiences. The following semester a one credit course which met for three (3) hours per week, for eight (8) weeks was also used as a data source. Journal and observation data was analyzed from this course. The survey had 56 questions related to demographic information, student development, physical activity/ability, self esteem, stress level, friendship, social activity, and peer beliefs.

Results and Conclusions

When the data was examined from a quantitative perspective, significant findings were revealed related to the decrease of stress for the participants. Using a two tailed paired sample test, the level of

stress was reduced for the college students at the conclusion of the course. Given the limited amount of data obtained from the survey, it was essential to exercise a methodology that recognized the participants' understanding and experiences. It was important to have a methodology that invited participant involvement and expression, and that viewed the participants in the context of their lives. Qualitative analysis allowed us to use an interview, observation, and journal process which was driven by the context of the participants' college experiences. Qualitative research embraces the participants' feelings, ideas, emotions, and personal accounts. It generates a depth of perception and first person account (Denzin, 1989). The voices and actions of the participants were heard and seen in context; it is an emic study, ideographic in nature (Denzin, 1989). Qualitative research allows the researcher to provide thick description, connections, strands, themes, and webs of significance for the person or persons being studied (Geertz, 1973).

When the data was analyzed from a qualitative approach certain themes emerged. The four themes were trust, friendship, community, and communication as a component of problem solving. The students discussed how their classmates became their friends and the quality of the friendships were more significant compared to other classmates in other classes. There was also a greater sense of community among the students. The college students reported that they learned how to work together to solve problems and to trust the group. Trust is important given the fact that an individual has to trust the group in order to complete specific aspects of the course. At times, the individual is dependent upon the group to provide valuable support and safety. The last theme dealt with communication and problem solving. When presented with a problem the group had to determine what problem solving process would be most effective to overcome any challenge. The vehicle that was used to resolve the dilemma was the process of communication. Communication was the key aspect to solving a specific problem presented in class.

Description of the Ropes Course

The Ropes Course is an outdoor experiential learning activity that involves a series of task and trust-oriented activities that will enhance the group's cohesiveness and ability to work together. Group members learn about themselves, how they work with others, and how groups work together to

effectively accomplish a task. There are a variety of initiative tasks that the group sets out to accomplish in order to bring about teamwork, trust, cooperation, and open communication between group members.

The elements are mostly wires attached to telephone poles at different lengths and with different configurations. For example, one element, known as the Mohawk Walk, is a series of wires stretched between different sized poles suspended about 12 inches from the ground. The object is for the entire group to walk the entire length of the wire without touching the ground. It takes a lot of problem-solving abilities by the group to accomplish the task successfully. It is a great team building activity.

Other group initiatives involve no equipment at all, just some wide open space for groups to interact and problem-solve. For example, the human knot is one that involves the entire group placing their right hands into the middle of a tight circle and grabbing someone else's hand across from them. Then the group places their left hands into the middle and grabs someone else's hands. The idea is to get the knot untied without letting go of hands.

As the group works through these different elements, trust is built among all the members as the tasks become more difficult to accomplish. The last elements are wires that are about 30 feet in the air suspended between telephone poles. Each member of the group climbs the pole and walks to the other side of the wire. The trust factor comes into play here, as the person is being belayed by a fellow group member.

In The Beginning

Before the students began the outdoor experiential ropes course, they were asked numerous questions related to their expectations. One such question was, "What are some areas in your life that you think this class can help you to improve?" One student said, "Trust in others and to gain more leadership. Not to be afraid to speak up." Another learner echoed the same thing, "My leadership skills to guide my children and to make my family a success." Probably the most powerful statement was from a male student in the class who stated, "To trust people other than my mother." Another common theme dealt with problem solving which was linked to teamwork, communication, speaking, and listening. One of the female students felt that in order to solve problems you needed to, "Analyze the situation and figure out a

strategy to go about it. Think out all options of the problem and their outcomes." By the end of the course the learners had accomplished all their goals as well as gained great insight into their physical and mental being. Such powerful insight did not stop at an individual but was also achieved by the community as a whole. The following narrative tells the student's experiences.

Trust

The theme of trust had many factors. Such factors dealt with being dependent upon another person which was contingent upon working as a group. If the participants did not feel a sense of teamwork or confidence in a member then this idea of trust could not and was not established. The theme of trust centered around the idea of interdependence and was part of the other themes. The idea of trust was articulated by two of the learners,

"Even though we didn't accomplish the Mohawk Walk we accomplished something bigger--Trust! I had no trust in anyone but now I do and I made new friends outside of football which is important because I don't like to change. But I did change for the better. I wish everybody had finished the Mohawk Walk, but I feel they did because they gave me trust by believing in me and encouraging me. That's a good feeling to have."

Another learner had this to say about trust,

"One of the biggest factors, in my opinion, was trust. In trusting, comes confidence in your teammates and in confidence getting your goal completed. If the trust isn't there you will be hesitant in what you do. That's something I felt grew a little more everyday. By the end I knew I could count on everyone single person and vice versa in accomplishing our goals. Overall, this class is a confidence builder, an ice-breaker, and a trust factor all wrapped into one. And all these aspects can help you in life."

Confidence and trust seemed to be dependent upon one another. Two of the students felt empowered by the course due to their feelings related to an increased sense of confidence. They had this to say,

"I love this class. I can feel my confidence rising. I think this is the best kept secret there is at [University]."

and

"After I completed the high elements, I felt great about myself. If this class can help one accomplish all these things, it can help anyone build their trust and confidence."

By the end of the semester one of the students left the course with a philosophical view. His understanding of the impact of the course was not limited to the material reviewed in class but to his belief about himself as a whole person. He stated the following belief,

"This course also helps people with the trust aspect of life. After doing different obstacles with the group, you can't help but to trust the guys at the other end of the rope. Trust is another very important aspect of life. You won't live a happy life if you don't trust anyone."

Friendship

Friendship would be defined as learning characteristics about a person (or persons) that is related to common experiences. Such common experiences can deal with support, companionship, and advice but are not related to forming shallow relationships for the purpose of completing the objectives of the course. Two of the more powerful statements related to forming friendships were described by the following two students,

"My evaluation of this class was that it was an incredible experience. I had an increase in confidence, self esteem, communication skills, building positive relationships, and strong networking skills were obtained. I feel better as a person for doing all the activities."

and

"I think this class came at a good time for me, prior to this class I [was] feeling a bit overwhelmed by some personal as well as financial problems. . . I was able to step away from things thanks to the course. This course has allowed me to look at myself somewhat less critically and to realize that my strengths are still there in other environments. I was also able to make some good friends, friendships that will be lasting because of our cohesiveness as a team. Overall I will be able to walk away with my head up and a good sense of accomplishment from the course."

In the middle of the course, one student wrote,

"I feel very, very close to the group now: I feel that I can talk to them about anything."

The same student on the last day of the class wrote the following comment,

"I enjoyed the course and I would take it again because it was so fun. I was kind of sad on this last day because I really enjoyed being around these people. And when we were in the group after the test, I had no idea that people thought I was that funny and I made them laugh. That is how I get unfrustrated by cracking jokes."

A student in his concluding remarks wrote,

"Well, it is over, by the way, it was definitely worth the extra $20.00 bucks. I am going to miss this class. I had a great deal of fun and made some new friends. The class challenged me physically and mentally. I really enjoyed this class and the people I met in it. I hope I get the opportunity to do something like this again."

Community

The theme of community was the most powerful and substantial of all the themes. Once the participants had a sense of community they were linked together and saw each person as an individual that functioned as a vital part of this functioning society. A female participant discussed her idea of belonging and had this to say,

"I think this class helps people in every aspect. For starters, it helps people come together and work with strangers to accomplish team goals. I think that getting people to work together for common goals is an important aspect of life. People can't go through life by themselves. Everyone needs somebody sometimes."

When the students were asked to described what they felt about the class, two of the students provided the following description related to being part of a community,

"This class in my mind was definitely a good learning experience. . . I learned how to work as a team to overcome obstacles that are a lot bigger than any one individual in the class."

The other male participant gave the following description,

"While doing the multi-line, I found it cool to have the rest of the group sincerely cheering me on while I was up there and afterwards I felt good about myself."

Another student wrote the following comment in his summary of the class,

"Teamwork was another key role that much emphasis was placed on. If one link from the chain is broken, then it won't work. You have to work as a team if you want anything to be accomplished. One of the biggest factors, in my opinion, was trust. In trusting comes confidence in your teammates and confidence getting your goals completed."

Communication and Problem Solving

Communication is the ability for each member or the majority of members in the group to discuss both verbally and nonverbally what they are thinking and feeling. A key aspect of communication was the ability of the group to solve problems. Problem solving was related to the ability of the group or individuals in the group to identify, describe and resolve dilemmas that were presented with each challenge. When given a task to complete as a group, individuals in the group would brainstorm or debate possible avenues to explore in order to complete such tasks. The vast majority of time this process was not an abstract process but concrete in nature. The following participant echoed this about communication,

"The greatest thing that we have in this group, to allow us to even make it this far, is the communication between the members. Without communication the group would never accomplish the things we [have] to do."

A student had this belief by the end of the semester,

"This has been one of the most fascinating classes that I have taken at [University]. It was not only fun but I was able to match wits with my peers and be a member of a team. A team that solved real tangible problems and not just abstract ideas. There was no summary of texts or critics of blasé motives. Our goals were outlined (by our group) on a physical basis and were then met by real physical challenges, problem solving, and interpersonal communication skills. I believe my potential foe success outside of a scholastic situation was increased."

Another student wrote the following journal entry in his summary of the class,

The class has come to an end and I feel I'm coming away with knowledge and experiences that will enhance me in many aspects. For example, communication was a big factor this past week. By everyone being heard we did better at getting our tasks done."

Instructors Conversation with a Student from the class.

The instructor of the ropes course describes a conversation with one of the students and had this description: He was a starter on the football team and told me that this class was the first time in his life that he felt like he had a sense of belonging and connection with the rest of the class. I asked him if he had felt any of that being on the football team. He responded by saying that in football when you are out on the field you play together as a team and do whatever it takes, but he never felt connected to any of the guys off the field. He said everyone just goes their own way when they come off the field. He admitted he was mostly a loner, and didn't make friends easily, but felt that this class was different and made him feel a part of the group even when we were not involved in any of the activities.

Discussion and Conclusion

Given the recent attention to school violence and violent behavior against diverse populations, the area of community development, trust development, and teaching non-violent ways to solve problems is a timely and powerful topic. Experiential learning, such as a ropes course, can increase a college student's ability to solve problems in a socially acceptable manner, build and teach a person how to appropriately trust others, empower a person about the skills necessary to be part of a healthy community, and increase a college student's interpersonal skills, social skills, and physical abilities. The characteristics associated with having a student generalize such skills stated above to any situation outside of a college environment is vital to student development. The ability to work as a team member within a group provides a person with an understanding that they are significant to the success of that group. Since such factors can be taught to college students, then the factors stated above may be generalized to a high school population. If such a generalization can occur, then high school students can learn to be a team, build trust, increase appropriate problem solving abilities, and interact as an accepting community.

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